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Epistemic Contrastivism, Knowledge and Practical Reasoning

Peter Baumann

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Abstract

Epistemic contrastivism is the view that knowledge is a ternary relation between a person, a proposition and a set of contrast propositions. This view is in tension with widely shared accounts of practical reasoning: be it the claim that knowledge of the premises is necessary for acceptable practical reasoning based on them or sufficient for the acceptability of the use of the premises in practical reasoning, or be it the claim that there is a looser connection between knowledge and practical reasoning. Given plausible assumptions, epistemic contrastivism implies that we should cut all links between knowledge and practical reasoning. However, the denial of any such link requires additional and independent arguments; if such arguments are lacking, then all the worse for epistemic contrastivism.

KEYWORDS: epistemic contrastivism; knowledge; practical reasoning; contrast sets.

One of the more recent developments in epistemology is contrastivism. Contrastivism about knowledge, “epistemic contrastivism” (see Sinnott-Armstrong 2004, Schaffer 2005, Karjalainen & Morton 2003, and Johnson 2001) has it that knowledge is not a binary relation between a subject and a proposition but a ternary relation between a subject, a proposition known and a set of one or more (false) contrast propositions.¹ The form of fully explicit knowledge attributions is thus not simply “S knows that *p*” but “S knows that *p*, rather than *q*”. In the following I will argue that epistemic contrastivism can only allow for an acceptable account of practical reasoning if it subscribes to an

1 For the sake of simplicity, I will often express myself here as if there is only one contrast proposition. Nothing of any substance depends on this simplification.

extreme view about the relation between knowledge and practical reasoning. If the latter is problematic or not supported by independent arguments, then epistemic contrastivism is in trouble (though not necessarily contrastivism in general).

Some philosophers hold that the premises of practical reasoning should be known – otherwise the reasoning would not be acceptable (see Hawthorne 2004, 29; Stanley 2005, 9; however, this is not uncontroversial: see, e.g., recently Baumann 2012, sections 5-6). Let us take this as the claim that knowledge of the premises is necessary for acceptable practical reasoning (the “necessity claim”). Since some of our actions are based on acceptable instances of practical reasoning, some of our actions would thus turn out to be based on knowledge. Or one can hold that knowledge of the premises of a given piece of practical reasoning is sufficient for acceptable use of the premise in that reasoning (the “sufficiency claim”). Since some of our practical reasoning is based on knowledge of the premises (and everything else is in order with it), some of our practical reasoning is acceptable and the actions based on it are rational. Alternatively, one could hold that even though knowledge of the premises is neither necessary for acceptable practical reasoning nor sufficient for it (given that everything else is fine with the piece of practical reasoning) it improves its quality. Finally, one could hold the rather extreme view that the question whether the premises are known or not is simply irrelevant to the acceptability or quality of the corresponding piece of practical reasoning.² - How does all this square with epistemic contrastivism?

Consider a case. Suppose Fred comes into his kitchen and notices a lot of what looks like water next to the washing machine. It is indeed water. Does he know that there is a lot of water next to the washing machine? According to the epistemic contrastivist he might know this in the sense that he, say, knows that there is water rather than gasoline. He can know this even if he does not know that there is water rather than some new explosive that looks just like water but explodes on touch (suppose he has stored some of the explosive on the shelves next to the washing machine). So far, so good. What should Fred do?

He might reason like this:

2 There are other possible views but they lack plausibility and need not be discussed here.

(PR)

(1) The liquid next to the washing machine is water.

(2) If that is so, then I should remove the liquid.

(3) Hence, I should remove the liquid.

We don't have to deal with the intricacies of practical reasoning here to be able to see that there is a question here for the epistemic contrastivist. Is Fred reasoning from a known first premise? According to the epistemic contrastivist: both yes and no, in a sense. The epistemic contrastivist cannot give an unqualified answer to the question whether Fred knows the (first) premise of the argument. The epistemic contrastivist only allows herself talk about contrastive knowledge: Fred knows that there is water rather than gasoline; in that sense he knows (1) in (PR). But he does not know that there is water rather than the new explosive liquid; in that sense he does not know (1) in (PR). There is nothing extraordinary or unusual about (PR) and the case above. There are many cases like that, that is, cases in which the subject could, according to the epistemic contrastivist, correctly be said to know some proposition, given certain contrast propositions (when certain contrast propositions are considered) but could at the same time also correctly be said not to know the proposition, given certain other contrast propositions (when certain other contrast propositions are considered).

This is troublesome if it makes a difference to the quality of a piece of practical reasoning whether the subject knows its premises. I will focus here on the necessity claim but similar things hold for the sufficiency claim (see below). If knowledge (whether understood contrastively or not) of the premises of a piece of practical reasoning is a necessary condition for the acceptability of that piece of practical reasoning, then contrastivists are not able to tell whether a given piece of practical reasoning as such is acceptable, even given that everything else needed for acceptable practical reasoning is in place (like the formal correctness of the reasoning). It would depend on the contrast proposition considered.³ If we restrict ourselves to the alternative that the liquid might be gasoline, then the reasoning looks very good. However, if we also consider the alternative

3 I am putting aside two types of special cases: cases where the target proposition p has no contrast q such that the subject knows that p rather than q , and cases where the target proposition p has no contrast q such that the subject does not know that p rather than q .

that it might be explosive, then it looks very bad. All this is certainly very counter-intuitive: The acceptability of a piece of practical reasoning does not seem to be relative to something like a set of contrast propositions. It should be good or bad in a non-relativized way. Lacking an argument to the effect that appearances are deceptive here and intuitions misleading, we must take the counter-intuitive nature of the above consequence to be a serious problem for epistemic contrastivism if it adheres to such a close link between knowledge and practical reasoning.

But why couldn't the acceptability of a piece of practical reasoning be as contrastive as knowledge (whatever the details of such an account)? There are serious problems with such a view. Consider all pieces of practical reasoning which are "otherwise" acceptable, that is, apart from the question whether they meet the condition that the premises are known by the reasoner. There will then (given the necessity claim) hardly be any such piece (leaving aside extreme cases; see fn.3) which is acceptable in an "absolute" way, that is, acceptable across all variations of contrast propositions.⁴ But the aim of practical reasoning is to find out what one ought to do (not just what ought to be the case) in this absolute sense. Why that? Well, Fred needs to act and he cannot both remove and not remove the liquid. There is also no such thing as a "contrastive action": It makes no sense to say that he removed the liquid in some respect but that in another respect he did not remove it.⁵ Given that practical reasoning aims at finding out what one ought to do, it has to be as absolute (in the sense of invariance across variation of contrast sets) as the acting rationalized and motivated by it.

But couldn't there still be a contrastivist understanding of *ought* and a contrastivist conception of practical reasoning? The problem is that even though we can make a lot of sense of contrastive obligations (see, e.g, Snedegar 2013a), they are limited to restricted sets of contrasts and don't help with the question what one ought to do all things considered and across all variations of contrast sets. Perhaps I ought to donate my 10-Dollar-bill to charity rather than donate nothing but perhaps I also ought to donate my old

4 Absoluteness in this sense is compatible with contrastivity. What matters is the uniqueness and invariance (with contrast sets) of the answer to the question "What is the right way to think about this and what should I do?".

5 Sure, given one standard of cleanliness Fred might count as having removed all of the liquid while given another standard of cleanliness he might not count as such. However, this is not the issue here. The problem above remains even for fixed standards of cleanliness.

car to charity rather than only \$10. How can all my insight into my contrastive obligations guide my action? I need a clear answer to the question “What ought I to do?” (e.g., “How much ought I to donate?”). I need some absolute deliberative ought like, e.g., “I ought to donate 30% of my income”. Guidance for action requires such absolute oughts and practical reasoning is supposed to identify them. If we restrict ourselves to contrastive oughts, then we would have to say that for some X we ought to X , given one contrast, but that it is not the case that we ought to X , given another contrast. One can even imagine cases where for some X we ought to X , given one contrast, but that we ought not to X , given another contrast: Perhaps one ought to give exactly \$10 to charity rather than nothing but one ought not to give only \$10 to charity rather than \$100. All this misses the practical question motivating and making sense of practical reasoning completely. Practical reasoning aims at identifying one required act (or set of acts), not many and not many mutually incompatible acts; it aims at identifying one ought and not many different or even incompatible ones. Hence, practical reasoning itself has to be understood as absolute.

To put it differently: Even if “being justified in X ing” (where “ X ” ranges over acts) and related terms should turn out to be contrastive, “having most reason to X , all things considered” doesn’t allow for variation with contrasts.⁶ Pro tanto reasons for X ing might turn out to be contrastive but all-things-considered reasons for X ing will be absolute.⁷ Apart from all that, it is hard to see how one could reason in the light of contrastivism about practical reasoning: A conclusion of the form “I should remove the liquid but only given some but not other ways of looking at the situation” seems close to a Moore-paradox and unacceptable.

One might object that the variability of contrast sets need not lead to an indeterminacy about the acceptability of a given piece of practical reasoning, even if one sticks with the claim that knowledge of the premises is necessary for acceptable practical reasoning. One could argue that acceptable practical reasoning only requires knowledge that p , rather than q , for all of those contrast propositions q which are of practical

6 see Sinnott-Armstrong 2006, esp. chs. 5 and 6 who does not defend contrastivism about all-things-considered reasons even though he defends contrastivism about justified moral belief. See also Snedegar 2013b, fn.2 for this restriction of contrastivism to pro tanto reasons.

7 see also Jordan 2014 who argues that virtue-ethical motivations are not compatible with contrastivism about practical reasons.

relevance to the context of deliberation. Roughly, one only needs to be able to rule out all the practically relevant alternatives to p . This move towards a more complicated claim about knowledge and practical reasoning, however, won't help much. Consider the above case about Fred's liquid and assume for a change that there are exactly two practically relevant contrast propositions: one, q , barely relevant and just above the threshold of relevance (e.g., *The liquid next to the washing machine is XYZ* which if true would only cause mild annoyance to Fred), and the other, r , of dramatic practical relevance (e.g., *The liquid next to the washing machine is the explosive Super-Duper* which if true would cause a serious threat to Fred's neighbourhood, given the proximity of municipal gas tanks). Suppose Fred knows that the liquid is water, rather than Super-Duper, but that he doesn't know it's water, rather than XYZ. Since he cannot rule out all of the practically relevant contrast propositions, Fred does not know the crucial premise (1) in (PR). His reasoning to the conclusion that he should remove the liquid would thus turn out to be unacceptable and deficient. This, however, seems very counter-intuitive: Isn't it even obvious that Fred ought to remove the liquid? Our problem remains.

Perhaps some would want to propose to measure degrees of practical relevance (apart from relevance thresholds below which the relevance is negligible) and modify the above idea along the following lines: Practical reasoning only requires knowledge that p , rather than q , for the contrast proposition q which is of higher practical relevance in the context of deliberation than any other contrast proposition. This would avoid the problems connected with the inclusion of all practically relevant contrast propositions. However, apart from the problem that two contrast propositions might both be of the highest and equal practical relevance but lead to opposing verdicts about the subject's knowledge (like, perhaps, the gasoline- and the explosives-proposition above), there are also serious problems with the very idea of degrees of practical relevance. What determines them? It might be worse to cause an explosion than to let gasoline damage the neighbor's apartment. But it might also be much more likely that the liquid is gasoline than that it is explosive. Should we then let the expected utility (or disutility) of the alternative acts (removing gasoline, removing the explosives) determine degrees of relevance? Going by the highest expected utility might give us the verdict that the practically relevant contrast proposition is the gasoline proposition. Given this, Fred

should remove the liquid (he knows it's water, rather than gasoline). But this seems to lack appropriate justification, given the disastrous consequences of perhaps causing an explosion.

If, in contrast, we go by the alternative principle of minimizing possible disutility (something like a maximin principle that gives little or no weight to probabilities and according to which one ought to choose an act the worst possible outcome of which is at least as good as the worst possible outcome of any alternative act), then the practically relevant contrast proposition is the explosives-proposition. Given that Fred does not (according to the contrastivist) know that the liquid is water rather than the explosive liquid, there is then no acceptable piece of practical reasoning in our case that would lead Fred to the conclusion that he should remove the liquid. Perhaps he should simply wait until some emergency team of anti-explosive specialists arrives. However, this might seem overly pessimistic to some.

Much more importantly, however, is that we are now facing a familiar dispute between adherents of expected utility views and maximin views of rational choice (see amongst many Resnik 1987 for an overview). Which one of such views should we favour? But most importantly: Now it turns out or becomes at least very plausible that what really drives the debate about the acceptability of some piece of practical reasoning (given the need to restrict the set of contrast propositions to practically relevant ones) is some principle like the expected-utility-principle or the maximin principle but not the claim that acceptable practical reasoning requires knowledge of its premises.⁸ - The above attempt not to let the variability of contrast sets for knowledge lead to an unwanted indeterminacy of practical reasoning by introducing a restriction to practically relevant contrast propositions seems bound to fail. To be sure, impossibility arguments are very hard to get but as long as there is no potential solution of the indeterminacy problem for contrastivism even on the horizon we should be pessimistic about the chances of there being such a solution.

If one assumes that knowledge of the premises is sufficient (or necessary and sufficient) for acceptable practical reasoning (given that everything else is in place),

8 Finally, there might be an infinite number of contrast propositions to consider or, at least, an indefinite number. How should we, under such conditions, ever get any grip on what the practically relevant alternative could be?

similar problems will arise. One and the same state of the subject can (in non-extreme cases; see fn.3) both be seen as sufficient (given knowledge of the relevant premises) for acceptable use of the premise in practical reason and as not sufficient for that (given lack of knowledge of the relevant premises). If everything else needed for acceptable practical reasoning is in place, then it could still be indeterminate whether some given piece of practical reasoning is good enough to be accepted or not. Like in the case of the indeterminacy about necessary conditions (see above) we would be left without an idea of how practical reasoning can guide action and tell us what we ought to do. - If we switch from knowledge as a precondition of rational action to justified belief as such a precondition, we still have to deal with the same kinds of issues: justified belief is as susceptible to contrastivist analysis as knowledge.⁹

Even if we don't accept the idea of a close connection between knowledge and practical reasoning (like in the necessity or the sufficiency claim), the epistemic contrastivist still has a problem. If one claims that knowledge of the premises of some piece of practical reasoning is neither necessary for the acceptability of this instance of practical reasoning nor sufficient for the acceptability of the use of the premises in the reasoning but also claims that it still improves upon its quality, then one has to face problems similar to the ones above.¹⁰

Is it better then to claim that knowledge is completely irrelevant to the quality of practical reasoning? This will seem quite implausible to many people: How could knowledge and practical reasoning be that independent from each other?¹¹ But epistemic contrastivism would (given plausible further assumptions about practical reasoning)

9 see for a similar problem about moral justification my 2008.

10 I won't explain this further here in order to avoid repetitions. - What if one said that practical reasoning based on a given proposition *p* is better (worse) the more (fewer) contrast propositions *q* there are such that the subject knows *p*, rather than *q* (thanks to a referee for this idea)? There are difficult questions about how to count contrast propositions and how to weigh their relative importance. Apart from that, this is not quite the proposal under discussion, namely that knowledge (construed contrastively or not) of a proposition improves the quality of practical reasoning based on it; this is rather the idea that "more knowledge" improves the quality of practical reasoning. However, this "additional" knowledge does not affect whether the subject knows the relevant target proposition *p*: If yes, then the additional knowledge won't improve her situation with respect to knowledge of *p*; if not, then the additional knowledge won't help her with respect to knowledge of *p*. To be sure: It might well be good to know more rather than less but this point seems irrelevant to the topic here.

11 This view is much stronger than the (quite popular) mere denial of the necessity claim or the sufficiency claim.

entail an extreme and very interesting claim about the relation between knowledge and practical reasoning: an “irrelevance view”. However, one does need additional and independent arguments for the irrelevance view. Lacking such arguments - and contrastivists haven’t come forward with any such arguments so far -, we should go by modus tollens and have at least some serious doubts (if not: reject) epistemic contrastivism.

Is there a way out of this problem for the epistemic contrastivist who does not want to cut all ties between knowledge and practical reasoning? It does not help to propose a contextualist version of epistemic contrastivism according to which the relevant contrast set is fixed by the context of the knowledge-attributor (see Cohen 1988, DeRose 2009, and Lewis 1996). What the subject has reason to do (typically) depends (at least to a large degree) on the practical situation of the subject (which often includes concern for others) and not so much on the potentially quite different practical situation of the attributor.¹² The contextual variability of verdicts about “knowledge” between different attributors is as problematic here as the variability of contrast sets.

In contrast, subject-sensitive invariantism (SSI) about knowledge (see Fantl & McGrath 2002, Hawthorne 2004 and Stanley 2005) – the view that knowledge does not only depend on the epistemic situation of the subject (true belief, warrant) but also on their non-epistemic situation, especially their practical interests – does not have that particular problem because the practical situation relevant to knowledge attributions is the subject’s practical situation. However, it is hard to see how epistemic contrastivism could be combined with SSI: According to the latter, there is a unique true answer to the question whether a given subject knows a given proposition whereas the question is underspecified according to the former. According to SSI, the subject-sensitive factors are fixed in each case; if one were to use those factors in order to determine the relevant contrast set in the given case, one would be giving up an essential element of contrastivism, namely the variability of contrast sets.

But what if one combined SSI with contrastivism by adding the following condition as a necessary condition of knowledge - in addition to (A) the belief condition, (B) the

12 Sinnott-Armstrong in 2004 or 2006 defends contrastivism but does not want any contextualism in his theory. - Similar problems arise for any combination of epistemic contrastivism with epistemic relativism (see, e.g., MacFarlane 2005 and also Kölbel 2002).

truth condition, and (C) the contrastivist “ruling out” condition: (D) S knows that p (out of the contrast set) only if S is rational to act and prefer as if p is true.¹³ Since the latter is sufficient for permissible use of p as a premise of practical reasoning, knowledge of p , too, turns out to be sufficient for permissible use of p as a premise of practical reasoning. One might conclude then that this modification of contrastivism can explain the connection between knowledge and acceptable practical reasoning or, at least, the sufficiency of the former for the latter. What should one think about this alternative proposal?

First of all, the lack of an explanation of why or how acceptable practical reasoning requires knowledge of its premises is a serious limitation of the scope of this proposal (but see below for an alternative alternative). More importantly, what explains why and how knowledge is sufficient for acceptable practical reasoning is none of the conditions (A)-(C) above but only condition (D). In other words, what explains that knowledge of p is sufficient for acceptable practical reasoning based on it is that knowledge of p requires the rational permissibility of acting on p : for instance, the rational permissibility of using p as a premise in practical reasoning (which can be regarded as one way of acting on p). But now we are (at least partly) explaining acceptable practical reasoning in terms of knowledge of the relevant premise the role of which can in turn be explained in terms of acceptable practical reasoning using that premise. Our alternative does not look that substantial any more – and uninformatively circular. It is not clear at all, to say the least, that knowledge plays any interesting role in an account of acceptable practical reasoning. - Alternatively, one might add to our alternative “pragmatic” contrastivism the claim that knowledge of p is also a necessary (and not only a sufficient) condition for acceptable practical reasoning based on p . This would certainly lack the drawback of only formulating a sufficient condition (see above). However, the above worries about uninformative circularity would be even more pressing. Again, the concept of knowledge ceases to play any substantive role in an account of practical reasoning.

Finally, could one not simply go back to a relevant alternatives theory of knowledge (see, e.g., Austin 1979, 87ff., 98ff.; Dretske 1970; Dretske 1981; Goldman 1992) according to which knowledge requires the subject’s ability to rule out all those

13 Thanks to a referee for pressing me here and coming up with this idea.

alternatives that are relevant in her situation? This is a very rough characterization of the view but sufficient here. Even though there are some clear similarities between relevant alternatives theories and epistemic contrastivism (see Dretske 1972), relevant alternatives theories are not contrastivist as they don't allow for the variability of sets of contrast propositions; rather, the situation of the subject determines one unique set of relevant alternatives. Hence, according to relevant alternatives theories (in contrast to epistemic contrastivism) there is typically a unique true answer to the (unrelativized) question whether a subject knows a given proposition. Apart from that, there will be additional problems with determining practical relevance (see the passages above on practically relevant contrast propositions).

With no help to expect from its theoretical "neighbors", contrastivism about knowledge is forced to choose between two options: either to give up on the idea that there is an interesting connection between knowledge and practical reasoning or keep this idea but give up on the aim of even allowing for an acceptable account of practical reasoning. Given some relevant connection between knowledge and practical reasoning, epistemic contrastivism is not compatible with an acceptable account of practical reasoning (not just contrastivist ones). Given an acceptable account of practical reasoning, epistemic contrastivism is not compatible with the idea of a relevant connection between knowledge and practical reasoning.

The former option seems out of the question: If an account of knowledge is incompatible with any plausible account of practical reasoning, then all the worse for that account of knowledge. One would need additional, independent, and very strong arguments against the feasibility of any plausible account of practical reasoning. Lacking such arguments, one should rather give up on the account of knowledge. The latter option – cutting all conceptual ties between knowledge and practical reasoning - is only slightly better for epistemic contrastivism. If this view entails (given plausible further assumptions) that there is no relevant link between knowledge and practical reasoning, then, again, one would need additional, independent, and strong enough arguments for such a strong (see fn.11 above) irrelevance view. Otherwise, epistemic contrastivism cannot plausibly claim to have offered support for an interesting account of practical reasoning. Should we really believe that an epistemological view as such can speak

decisively for or against a view on practical reasoning? Lacking such arguments for the irrelevance view, we should, again, go by modus tollens, and rather reject epistemic contrastivism. This is epistemic contrastivism's problem of practical reasoning.

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